

Book Review

Women's Activism in Africa edited by BALGHIS BADRI and AILI MARI TRIPP
London: Zed Books, 2017. Pp. vi+250. £19.99 (pbk.)

Debates on women's rights and gender equality in Africa often centre on how international norms are interpreted at a local level. This book, which is written and edited by African women activists, presents an alternative vision. Aiming to 'challenge the stereotype that African women are passive, underprivileged and simply under the domination of patriarchy' (p.22), this edited collection shows not only how African women's movements have contributed to shaping and defining global approaches to women's advancement, but also how they have brought about positive changes in national constitutional and legal reforms, women's political representation, business leadership, peace-making and peace-building.

The book includes eight country case studies from across Africa. Collectively, they situate the emergence and mobilisation of transformative feminist movements in the history and politics of their countries, democratisation and liberalisation agendas. They illustrate the diversity of conceptualisations of feminism, as well as the range of activist strategies that are used: from state support and civil society coalition-building, to regional networking and social media. They show how African women's activism rejects discourses that present women as victims, and instead, challenges the structural issues that underlie gender inequality.

The case studies explore critically the gains that have been made, as well as the challenges that women's movements have faced. Origins, unity and fragmentation of national feminist movements are enduring themes throughout the book. The chapters on Ghana by Akua Britwum and Angela Akorsu, and on Kenya by Regina Mwatha, explore how contemporary women's movements grew from the grassroots in traditional communities and rural marketplaces. Nana Pratt describes the importance of Sierra Leone's women's movements in nationwide peace-building and unity following civil war. By comparison, the chapters by Fatima Sadiqi on Morocco and Samia Al Nagar and Liv Tønnessen on Sudan analyse the historical secularist and Islamic divides in their countries' women's movements and the obstacles to reform posed by colonial and contemporary political rule. On South Africa, Sheila Meintjes discusses how a 'professionalising' of feminist activities and engagement with the newly democratised state also led to the marginalisation of grassroots activism. Aili Tripp's chapter on Tanzania provides an interesting counterpoint, where a united women's movement was born out of Julius Nyerere's vision of African socialism and national unity across religious and ethnic groups. Reflecting on how Tunisian feminists have communicated their ideas, Lilia Labidi notes generational shifts, from books and letters, to songs and social media.

What makes this book special and authoritative is the wealth of experience of the contributors as activists in their countries' women's movements. Myth-busting statistics evidence the progress that has been made in women's advancement in politics, business, employment, FGM and early marriage. I found the historical contextualisation throughout the book particularly valuable for understanding the range of challenges and activist strategies across different countries. This is an excellent contribution to the literature on African feminism and international women's rights agendas. The book will be valuable to students and researchers of African politics, development studies, human rights and gender studies, as well as policymakers and, of course, activists.

HELEN DANCER
University of Sussex